Maleeva in U.S. Open match

Associated Press

Martina Navratilova dejectedly leaves the court Thursday after losing to Magdalena Maleeva at the U.S. Open.

NEW YORK (AP) — Martina Navratilova fled the U.S. Open with a look of shock and sadness, her face pale and her eyes swollen, victimized again by the "Maleeva Conspiracy."

Magdalena Maleeva's linekissing groundstrokes, an untimely cloudburst and a touch of age combined Thursday to hand Navratilova her earliest U.S. Open loss since 1976 — the year after Maleeva was born.

"It is pretty bad, yeah," Navratilova said, ranking the 6-4, 0-6, 6-3 loss among the worst of her career. A finalist here last year and in 1989, she came in seeded No. 3 after a recent victory over Monica Seles, and considered herself a realistic contender for a fifth Open championship.

Now Navratilova, a month shy of 36, has to reassess her future.

"Time is running out," she said. "I don't know how much more I have in this head, this heart, these legs."

The upset occurred on the same stadium court where Manuela Maleeva beat Navratilova in the fourth round two years ago, but this one stung a lot more.

Navratilova joked that she'll go down in history as one of the few players to lose at least once to all three Bulgarian-born Maleeva sisters — Maggie, 17, Katerina, 23, and Manuela, 25.

"I'm glad she's the last one," Navratilova said. "But I beat their mother (Yulia). I never lost to their mother. I didn't beat her badly, though. She had three daughters after that."

John McEnroe, also a four-time Open champion, was nearly another victim of an upset in a match switched from day to night because of the rain. McEnroe overcame a sluggish start and a rash of complaints to the umpire, linesmen, the crowd and even a ballboy before winning 11 straight games and beating No. 105-ranked Diego Nargiso 4-6, 6-3, 6-0, 6-2.

"I actually got my bags ready to go home, then all of a sudden the rain stopped and we had to play," McEnroe said. "The wind played havoc with the balls in the first set. But I'm more of a night person, and if I can play at night it's an advantage for me."

Brad Gilbert saved three match points and needed 8¼ hours, including two rain delays of a half-hour and four hours, to upset No. 11 Michael Stich 5-7, 6-3, 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7-0) just before midnight.

Navratilova appeared to have Thursday's match totally in control as the third set began. But rain suspended play for the third time of the day and the first time in the match at 30-30 with Maleeva serving in the opening game of the final set.

When they returned about half an hour later, Navratilova no longer dominated with her charges to the net. Instead, she looked tentative, fending off deep groundstrokes that clipped the baseline and sides.

"If ever I lost a match by a few inches, today was the day," Navratilova said, recalling a couple of big points when her shots were "out by an inch or two and hers caught the back of the line."

She said she was nervous at times, while Maleeva always looked relaxed.

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been running me out of quite a bit," said Barton, who is 6-1 with a 3.38 ERA in 10½ innings of work. "There are two other left-handed relievers in the ballpen (Dennis Powell and Russ Swan) and Juan Agosto is on the way back. Because they promised him he'd be back in September. But they're looking at me pretty hard."

Barton is being used mainly as a situational pitcher, coming in during the late innings to face one or two batters, usually left-handers. On Wednesday night, he had Boston's Wade Boggs 0-2 before the Red Sox third baseman lined a double to drive in two runs. Barton had retired Boggs on two previous occasions.

"It's really a thrill to pitch to guys like Wade Boggs," Barton said. "These are guys who you have watched for years.

"But I'm not intimidated by any of these hitters. As a pitcher, you can't give them any respect, just like they don't give pitchers any respect. I'm not afraid to pitch inside or knock somebody down if I have to do it to be effective."

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Chris Vasquez has put up some respectable numbers this season for the Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Reds. The

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Sigman has shot at wrapping up Speedway Sportsman title

The final Sportsman points night at Saugus Speedway has more to offer this season.

For the first time in three years, the points championship is up for grabs — sort of.

Points leader Gary Sigman needs only to score nine points to clinch his first points title.

Drivers receive three points for wins in the trophy dash and heat races, two for second and one for third. In the main event, the winner is awarded 28 points with the remainder of the field receiving points in decreasing fashion (24 for second, 22 for third, etc.).

In other words, Sigman is a virtual lock.

The Carson resident has averaged almost 21 points a night for his 15 starts this season (312 points) — finishing in the top 10 in every race — and holds a 26-point advantage over his closest challenger.

Even if Sigman should fall short of his quota, making up the deficit is a longshot at best.

Except maybe for Lance Hooper.

The defending Sportsman points champion has dominated the division the past two months and enters Saturday as the only driver with a shot at overtaking Sigman.

The 1985 Saugus graduate moved into title contention with six main-event wins in the past seven weeks. He was 56 points behind Sigman before he started his tear.

So scoring the maximum 34 points is not out of reach.

Motor Sports
Ron B. Stapp

But Hooper is obviously going to have to have some help, something he did not need a whole lot of last season when he clinched the title by eliminating Sigman before the final points night.

Now Sigman is hoping to return the favor.

"I know my chances are long, but I ain't going to back off," Hooper said. "I'm just going to drive every race as hard as I can and hope Gary has some bad luck."

That is something that has not happened to Sigman all year.

Even though Hooper has dominated the division of late, he has gained only 13 points in the past four weeks because Sigman usually finishes close behind.

"I've just got to focus on what I've done to get me here," Hooper said, "and then look to see how Gary did."

Saugus Speedway notes:

Sportsman — Former Saugus track champion Ray Hooper Jr., Lance's older brother, has raced the past two main events in the Gayle Colvin-owned car. Russ Beckers drove the car last season. Hooper finished ninth last week. . . . Two-time champion Will Harper, who has raced on the Southwest Tour the past two seasons, also competed Saturday, finishing 18th. . . . Joe Heath of Northridge broke the Sportsman track record with a one-lap qualifying time of 16.36. Lance Hooper broke the record with a 16.35 fast time, but his car was disqualified for being too light. . . . John Higgins, who won his first Sportsman main event two weeks ago, dropped to 10th in the points standings after opting to skip last week's races at Saugus. The Simi Valley resident raced at Mesa Marin Raceway in preparation to the Southern California Racing Series. He is slated to compete in El Cajon this weekend.

Pro-Stock — Rick Crow made a miraculous recovery last week. After totalling his car in a collision in the figure 8 main event two weeks ago, the Canyon Country resident returned to action the following week, finishing second in the oval main event in Don Reynolds' car. . . . In addition to Crow, three other drivers raced in the oval feature in borrowed cars. Scott Dinger (second in points), Rip Michels (third) and Terry Custer (fifth) were without their cars.

Saturday's action at Saugus Speedway — In addition to the Sportsman competition, three other points races look to be decided. Ron Cerven is trying to clinch the Street Stock points title. The Lancaster resident is 10 points ahead of Jeff Saelid of Sun Valley in his first season of racing both the oval and figure 8 main events. Mike McAtee of North Hollywood is also in the hunt, just 14 points behind. . . . Dave Phipps of Simi Valley is seeking a second straight Grand American Modified championship. The three-time Sportsman champion leads former Street Stock track champion Dave Blankenship of Reseda by 25 points. . . . Rich Ocheltree is hoping to hold off Chuck Berry in the Hobby Stock points race. Ocheltree won the last main event three weeks ago and leads Berry by seven points.

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Mike Kiedrowski continued his domination in the American Motorcylist Association 500cc National Championship Motocross Series with his second victory in three starts this season.

The Canyon High graduate swept both motos at Broome-Tioga Sports Center in Binghamton, N.Y., on Sunday and moved into sole possession of first place in the AMA series 500cc points standings.

Kiedrowski leads the series with 142 points, six points better Jeff Stanton of Sherwood, Miss. Castaic resident Lance Smail finished 12th in the event and is in ninth place overall.

The series takes three weeks off before moving to Delmont, Pa., Sept. 27.

Ron B. Stapp is a freelance writer. His motor sports column appears Fridays.